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Teaching Theory as Composition

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TEACHING THEORY AS COMPOSITION

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The purpose of this brief paper is to share some ideas about and strategies for the teaching of theory as composition. This may well be preaching to a choir.

We might all agree that "theory" is an inaccurate term for what we teach, at least what we teach to undergraduates. What we are concerned with is not so much "theory" as *music*. Theories of music, metatheories, field theories of cognition or musical structure may implicitly underlie our teaching; but what we are really teaching is, as Sessions suggests, musical *practice*. The more we can convince our students that we are engaged in the practice, the actual *doing* of music, the better. This involvement with the Thing Itself pays large dividends in the commitment of our students to the learning process and insures that the classroom will be a lively place. The performance, analysis, and composition of real music are central to this process.

We are all familiar with those days in the classroom when it just isn't fun to be there. Having fun isn't a prerequisite for learning. But teaching is so draining when you, and they, aren't enjoying the experience. When this happens, it usually means we're not hearing and performing enough music—or applying what we know (and think and feel) in an analytic or creative context. The creation of contexts and connections is, I think, the essence of effective teaching. Only connect. If we can manage to connect the specifics of technique with the aesthetic principles they embody then we should be going a long way toward invigorating the classroom. What too often happens is that the details of techniques, the individual operations, somehow become ends in themselves. Facts tend to replace principles, instead simply of *embodying* them. These principles are not merely musical but invoke larger issues of aesthetics, psychology, and anthropology.

For instance, periodic structure embodies the fundamental call-and-response pattern indigenous to all cultures. It also invokes the binary nature of much human experience, and ultimately the origins of musical structure in the dance. We are, after all, bi-pedal beings. This thinking leads easily to the notion that meter, periodic structure, and large-scale form are all expressions of the same simple sets of relationships. So the identification of

periodic structures in Mozart or Bach can lead naturally to some useful global thinking about what we loosely call "form," and its origins in human experience. Or, to take another example, it would be a mistake to discuss the dominant triad without reference to its form-building properties, its structural functions as intermediate harmonic goal or divider. Likewise, it would be a mistake to ignore the way in which it embodies the tension-release principle.

Figure 1 informally suggest the natural flow of these connections. What these flow-charts intend to show is a movement from specifics through generalizations to principles and finally to useful outcomes. These outcomes might include better informed hearing, more sensitive performing, or finer composing. Each level of the chart represents the same logical flow, somewhat variously stated.

Figure 1.

a. Basic skills ——→ Intermediate exercises ——→ Composing (writing and analysis)

b. Observations → Generalizations → Principles → Outcomes

c. What → How → Why → How → What (outcomes)

When the connection between technique and principle is made clear in the classroom, theory study becomes less abstract, less separated from the experience of the practicing musician. Every technical point needs to be reinforced as soon as possible, by hearing, performing, analyzing, and finally by composing. And it is to the latter that we should now turn.

For many students there exists a substantial gap between their study of counterpoint, part-writing, and harmony, and the realization of such studies in a musical context—a context in which style, expression, and technique are fully integrated. The bridging of this gap concerns all of us who teach theory. It is in part bridgeable, as already suggested, if we insist that the experience of the classroom be practical and musical, an experience in which listening, performing and the analysis of whole musical works is central. But the gap is, perhaps, best bridged by composing. And one need not wait until the latter stages of theory study to insist on solid musical values in the written work. This can be done almost from the outset by

carefully structuring the written exercises. Figures 2 -15 are samples of the exercises I use with my Theory I and Theory II students, from the first semester on. These formats are the basis for a good deal of the written work; they may also be worked out in class, individually or together at the board or piano. Some also lend themselves especially well to improvisation or dictation. Working out compositional problems at the board together is, as you know, an especially productive use of class time. It can serve as a way of introducing the compositional process. This modeling demystifies and objectifies composing. One might well object to the reduction of an essentially mysterious creative process to a series of problem-solving routines, but I would rather not deal with this issue in the present context.

Figures 2-15 offer a variety of writing formats, moving from the very restrictive, in which most of the details are specified, to the more open-ended, providing progressively more opportunities for compositional decision-making. These exercises are limited to courses concerned with tonal practice, but a similar range of formats can be used with almost any technique or style. They are drawn from various books of mine,[1] simply because I'm familiar with how they work. Such exercise formats represent a practical middle-ground between preliminary part-writing work and composition in the tonal manner. It should be understood that in most courses there will have to be a certain amount of preliminary work in counterpoint, part-writing and harmonization, including figured and unfigured basses, as well as a good deal of analysis. It's important that the analytic work include all aspects of the musical structure, not merely the description of discrete surface events in the music.

The formats given in Figures 2-15 represent a mixture of Theory I and Theory II exercises. In the Peabody Conservatory's program, these courses deal with tonal counterpoint, harmony, and small forms. Figures 2-6 are tightly structured exercises: form, harmonic content, and style are givens. These exercises include figured and unfigured basses in the Baroque manner, a Romantic piano piece, and an exercise in ensemble writing. Incidentally, they all work well as improvisation exercises.

Figure 2.

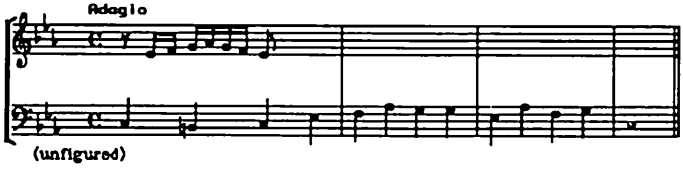


Figure 3.

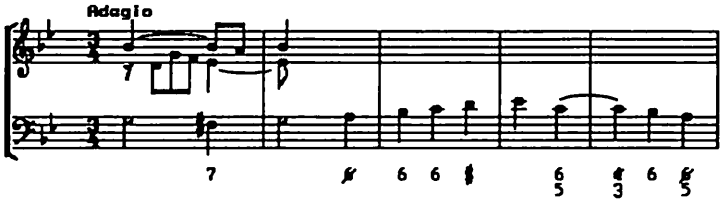


Figure 4. Complete the realization of the following figured bass in the given texture. Then compose an *espressivo* solo line for an instrument available in class.

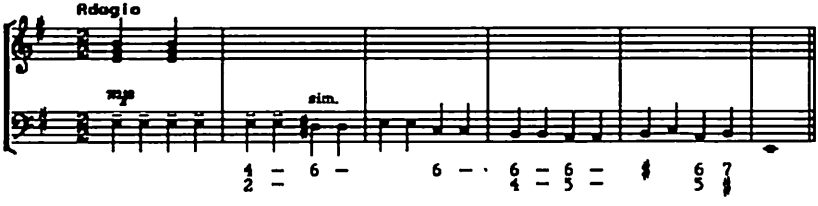


Figure 5. Harmonize the following melody in the indicated texture, using linear diminished seventh chords where indicated by an asterisk:

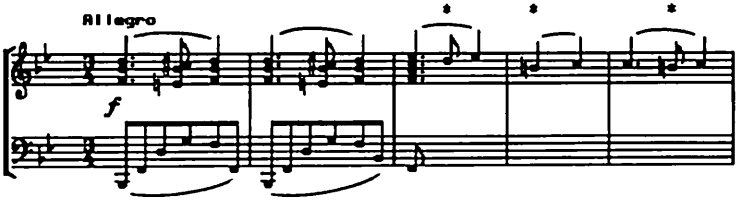


Figure 6.

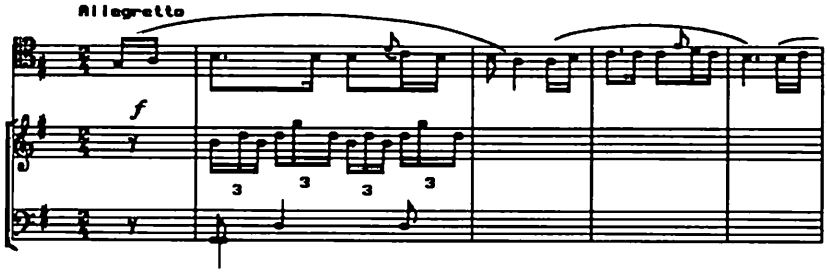


Figure 7 is a rhythmic outline for three-voice counterpoint; Figures 8 and 9 are part-writing frameworks. Such frameworks give, in effect, middle- and foreground structural pitches, asking the student to fill in the motivic and rhythmic surface. They can be worked out in any appropriate style.

Figure 7. Compose an eight-to-twelve measure example of three-voice counterpoint based on the following rhythmic model for mm. 1-2.

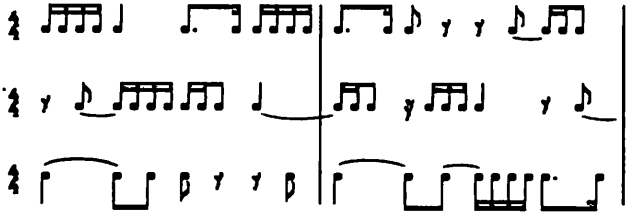


Figure 8. Articulate the next two two-voice frameworks, mainly in eighth notes. Be attentive to motifs, rhythmic continuity, and nonharmonic activity.

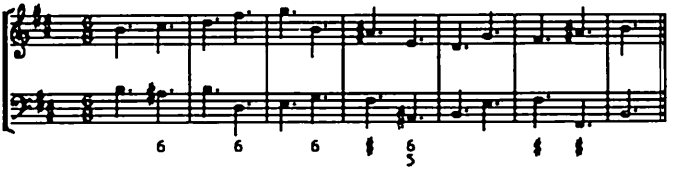
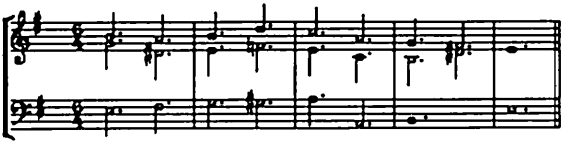


Figure 9.



Figures 10-15 continue the loosening-up process, giving an opening for continuation, a chord-phrase format (for improvisation, writing, or dictation), formal outlines, and a bass for a passacaglia. Sectional variation forms are, of course, an excellent basis for the introduction of compositional thinking, as they avoid some problems of form and allow the student to focus on the foreground level.

Figure 10.

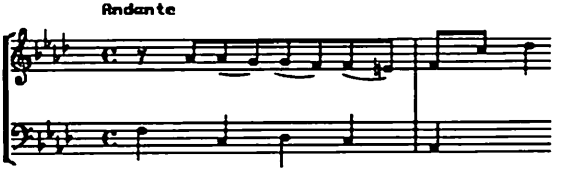


Figure 11.

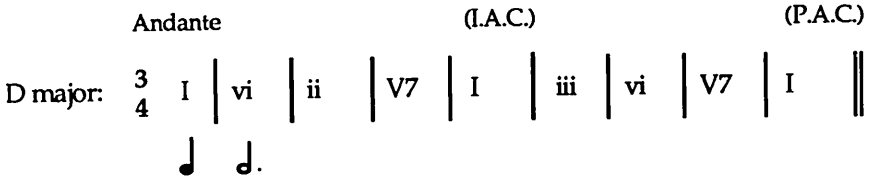


Figure 12. Analyze simple examples of nonimitative counterpoint as suggested by the instructor. Compose a simple two-voice Baroque binary suite movement as follows:

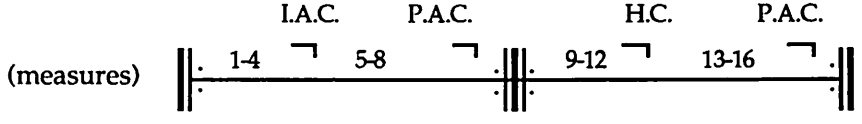
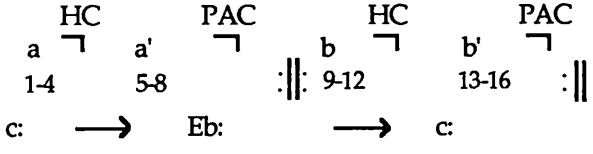


Figure 13.

Courante:



Gavotte:

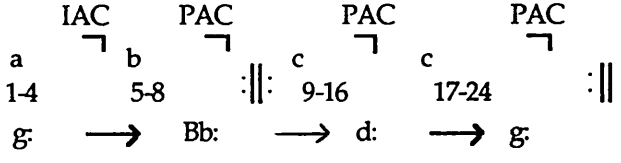


Figure 14. Compose a passacaglia on the following bass. Refer to Part V, Unit 19, on counterpoint.

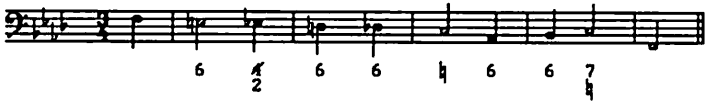


Figure 15. Following the given structural-pitch format, compose a 16-measure piece for instruments and/or voices available in class. Use only the harmonic vocabulary discussed so far.

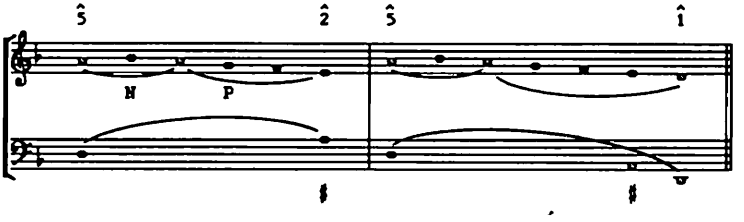


Figure 16 suggests some ways of assigning open-ended composition projects, which will tend to vary considerably according to the course and the instructor. I usually assign two such projects in a semester, depending on the course and the capabilities and interests of the students, and on the size of the class. Some classes are simply more interested and talented in composition than others, though all classes should get to do some composing. It may be wise to specify that these projects be written in stages or drafts, and that each draft be shown to the class or at least the teacher. This allows one the opportunity, in effect, to give a series a public compositions lessons in class, or private ones during office hours. As time permits, one should ask the class to participate in the process of critiquing and revising, permitting them to confront a variety of musical issues, and sharpening their critical listening abilities.

Figure 16.

Some possible free-composition assignment instructions (which will, of course, vary greatly with the instructor):

1. Choose any short, rhyming, metrical text and set it for voice and piano (or any instrumental combination available in class). Check choice of text with the instructor before composing the song. Let instructor (class) see at least one preliminary draft and one complete draft before the final version. Then copy out the work cleanly and clearly, with complete performance instructions (editing). Rehearse before performing in class.

2. Compose a work for any instrumental combination available to you during the class meeting time. Use only the technical vocabulary discussed thus far in the course. The overall formal structure may be assigned or may be freely chosen. Present one preliminary draft and one complete draft to the class; the drafts should be fully analyzed. The final version should be clearly copied, edited, and rehearsed before performing in class.

3. Present to the class a ground-plan of a composition. This may be a verbal sketch and/or a formal graph of the proposed work. Include in your sketch an indication of its affect (character, mood, feeling). Then compose the work, following the ground-plan as far as possible but abandoning it when the musical materials suggest otherwise.

4. Study the choral writing of Mozart. Then set a text of your choosing, or one assigned by the instructor, making it sound as much as possible like Mozart. Be sure to check all aspects of your text-setting with the instructor, including affect, accentuation, prosody, and so on. Analyze your preliminary drafts and show them to the instructor. Copy the work clearly, edit it, and rehearse it before performance in class.

Here the teacher runs into the potential problem of over-directing, of imposing on the student one's own taste and ear. This is after all a central problem in teaching composition, and if one is simply alert to it, the danger will be minimized. Several related issues should be raised now. First, how restrictive should one be regarding style? My tendency is to be quite open, as long as the techniques used in any student work are appropriate to its style. I always ask that the musical materials reflect those studied in the course. When a student uses musical language far outside that on which the course is based, I ask that the work be re-thought or at least adjusted.

Some students may be limited in their exposure to "classical" music. They will naturally write what they are familiar with, often in a pop-ish idiom. This seems to me fine, as long as the results are congruent with the course content. If, on the other hand, a student's intuitive grasp of the materials exceeds the course content, it may be wise to accept the result, assuming it makes musical sense and relates in a general way to the course materials.

Originality of expression may be a non-issue in student compositions. Student pieces will often vaguely resemble the work of some well-known composer, or even a specific work. This does not become a problem as long as the student work is not too literally based on some other piece. The issue is somewhat delicate, and must be handled case-by-case by the teacher.

A more serious issue is that of class size. It is, in fact, time-consuming to write and perform composition projects. With classes larger than 25 or so, it may be impractical to assign more than one project in a semester. For lecture classes of 30 or more, it may simply be impossible. Administrators responsible for class sizes need to be made aware that theory teaching involving any degree of composition cannot be done properly in a large class setting.

The project instructions given in Figure 16 insist on clear, neat, fully edited score and parts, and specify that what we hear in class be a performance and not just a reading. This avoids wasting class time in correcting parts, and allows sufficient time for two performances of each work, separated by a brief discussion. All works are taped, as students love to have a taped record of their pieces.

Figure 17 is an informal checklist of some fundamental aesthetic issues or principles. This list is developed early in Theory I through analytic work; its items tend to get written often on the board, and are constantly discussed and applied in listening, analysis, and written work, and especially in the evaluation of student compositions. This list, or some version of it, forms the bottom-line basis for all my theory teaching, regardless of the course.

Such lists are very personal; all teachers naturally develop their own version. The importance of developing some such list of principles in class, through hearing and analysis, I feel, can't be overstressed.[2]

Figure 17.

A tentative (and constantly changing) list of basic musical principles and aesthetic issues derived from analytic work and applied to student writing:

Expression/character/affect is clear
Convincing overall dramatic shape
Clarity and proportion of form
Concinnity of all musical elements
Coherence (motivic, harmonic, textural)
Harmonic/linear directionality and consistency
Confirmation of all main ideas
Options for continuation explored
Fundamental gesture at all structural levels (Grundgestalt)
Organicity (gesture, shape, motive)
The Big Line
Strong outer-voice framework
Strong part-writing
Idiomatic writing for all instruments/voices
Some dualities:
- Unity/Variety
- Continuity/Articulation
- Tension/Relaxation
- Exposing/Developing
- Static/Dynamic
- Regular/Irregular
- Directed/Undirected

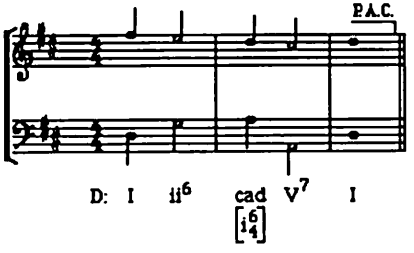
Central to the development of compositional thinking is the working out in class of various exercise types. Figures 18 and 19 give two formats and two realizations, as they might be worked out together at the board or piano. Figure 18 suggests one possible realization process for a chord-phrase format, moving from outer-voice framework through part-writing, articu-

lated part-writing, and finally to something approximating free composition of a phrase. Figure 19 does the same in a Baroque context. Students seem to find such handouts, and comparable class work at the board, useful both for clarifying technical details and for the modeling of the composition process. It may reasonably be argued that this step-by-step conscious-process model does not approximate a real composer's way of working. This may be true, but pedagogically most students seem to need a rational procedural algorithm, even those most intuitively gifted in composition. Besides, if all students had their instinctual musical capacities in working order, we'd hardly have to require several years of theory study.

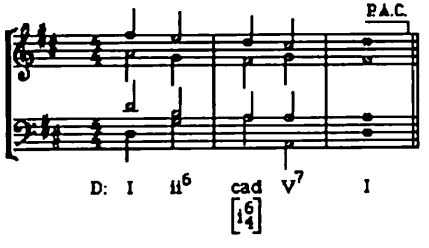
Figure 18. The following procedure may be used for expansion and elaboration with the chord-phrase formats and figured or unfigured basses:

D major: $\frac{4}{4}$ I ii^6 | [I $^6_4$] (cad.) V^7 | I ‖

I. Provide outer voices.



II. Complete the basic part-writing.



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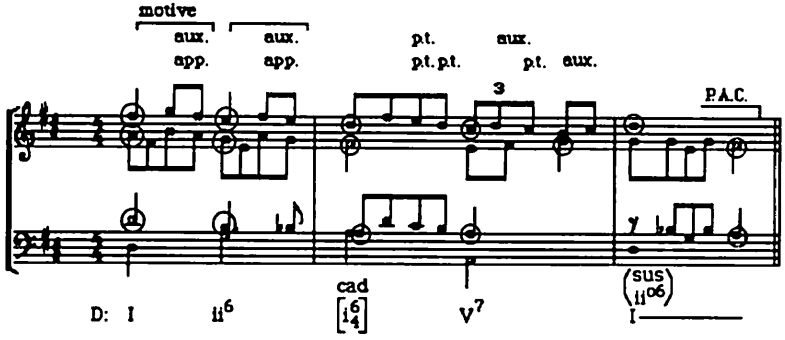
III. Further expand the basic part-writing.



IV. Finally, use more textural expansion, a new soprano line, a more linear bass line, and fuller harmony. Edit fully.

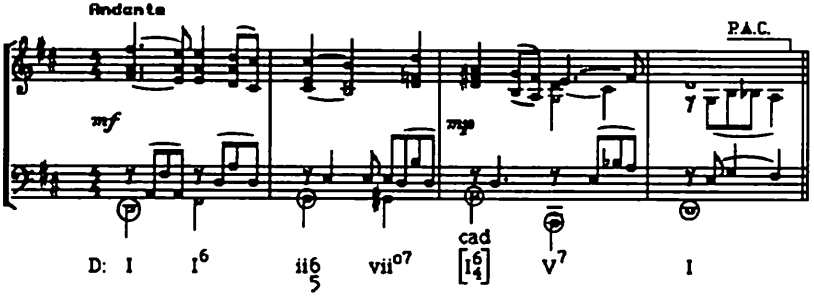
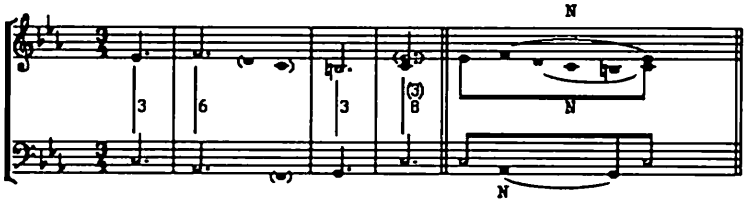


Figure 19. Chord-Phrase Format (Harmonic Framework).

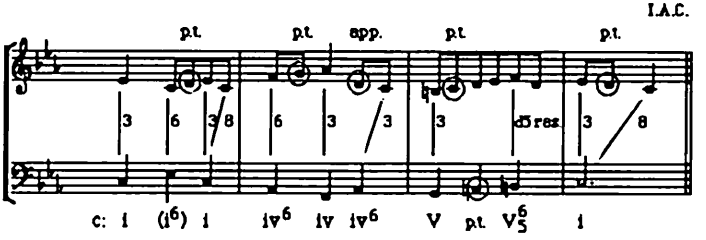
1. Spell the chords and compose a two-voice framework.
2. Articulate the framework in the usual way, and check thoroughly.

Given problem: c: $\frac{3}{4}$ i | iv^6 | V (7) | i ||

1. Framework:



2. Articulation: checking:



To sum up, I strongly urge the teaching of basic theory courses as composition, or at least with a substantial composition component. As I suggested earlier, there are demonstrable outcomes, in terms of engagement and excitement in the classroom. An involved student is one who is learning, and who is likely to retain a good deal of what has been learned. Students always enjoy composing. There is an obvious aspect of ego-gratification in the process. Students rarely have their egos fully involved in classroom studies—nor are they often placed in academic settings that validate their intuitive, instinctual, creative side. They will tend to put a lot

of effort into such work, and the payoffs of learning, retention, and an exciting classroom atmosphere are considerable.

Above all composing can help bridge the gap between mere technique and actual music-making. It can help to connect skills with concepts, and lead the student to understand how specific operations are simply instances of underlying principles. These understandings should have a distinct impact on their overall musicianship, as listeners, performers, composers, teachers.

NOTES

[1]The musical examples are all drawn from: Benjamin, *Counterpoint in the Style of J.S. Bach*, Schirmer Books, 1986; and Benjamin, Horvit, Nelson, *Techniques and Materials of Tonal Music*, 3rd edition, Houghton Mifflin, 1986.

[2]See my article, "On Teaching Composition," in *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy*, 1/1 (Spring 1987): 57-76.

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